
CALIFORNIA POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION COMMISSION

A non-partisan policy board established in 1974 by the Governor and Legislature

VIRTUAL TEACHING AND LEARNING IN CALIFORNIA HIGHER EDUCATION

Brief 97-3

Background

Over 1.7 million Californians are currently enrolled in a public college or university within the state. CPEC's planning document, *The Challenge of the Century*, projects a tidal wave of over 450,000 additional new students by the year 2005. These potential students are already enrolled in elementary and secondary schools and are being encouraged to better prepare themselves for the option of college attendance.

The cost of providing collegiate access to this so-called "Tidal Wave II" of new students is estimated by the Commission to be approximately \$1 billion per year every year for the foreseeable future -- a cost beyond the capacity of the State to meet in the current environment. Strategic use of technology -- the so-called "virtual" environment of providing teaching and learning opportunities independent of time and place -- is thought by many to be a partial solution to the mismatch between demand and the fiscal capacity of California to accommodate that demand.

What are some of the expectations of technology use?

There is little empirical evidence to validate the belief that technology use will reduce the cost of providing quality instruction. In fact, it is likely that providing public colleges and universities with the capacity to effectively incorporate technology will require substantial State investment in the near term and an ongoing fiscal commitment over the long term. Among the contributions that technology can make are:

- ◆ Enhancement of administrative efficiencies
- ◆ Improved student learning and ability to document student outcomes
- ◆ Shared use of resources between and among campuses and systems
- ◆ Reduced demand for permanent campuses and physical facilities

(Over)

Will increased use of technology lead to a California virtual university?

California may very well decide to initiate a virtual university but use of technology to expand teaching and learning opportunities is not dependent on the creation of a virtual university. California's public colleges and universities are already making considerable use of technology to create virtual teaching and learning opportunities for individuals residing at a distance from the nearest college campus through such vehicles as satellite transmission, Internet, CD ROM, and video cassettes. In addition, some campuses are incorporating personal computers as a means to reinforce student mastery of basic learning and academic content skills. These uses should continue to be encouraged and expanded.

Governor Wilson recently declined an opportunity to join the Western Governors' Association in creating a virtual university that would commence operation in fall 1997 and expressed his desire to pursue a California-version of a virtual university. A number of the organizing principles and the activities of the Western Governors' Association initiative are laudable -- increasing access to education, training and lifelong learning; developing consistent standards for assessing learning; learner-centered approaches to teaching and learning; cooperation among institutions, government, and private corporations; and elimination of policies and practices that restrict collaboration across institutional and geographical barriers.

What are the key issues associated with a virtual university?

The Commission has identified a number of critical issues related to creation of a virtual university. The concept of a virtual university denotes the existence of some identifiable entity and stimulates questions of whether the entity will be designated as part of an existing public system, intersegmental in nature, a new public entity, a private entity, or some combination thereof. Unlike a virtual teaching-learning environment -- which currently exists to a limited degree -- a virtual university requires more careful consideration of financing and pricing strategies, and market-share issues. There are also additional concerns related to (1) articulation and transfer of course credit earned by students for courses designed and provided by the various sectors of postsecondary education and, potentially, commercial vendors; (2) new and additional requirements for statewide planning and coordination; (3) implications for capital expenditure needs; and (4) new data collection needs.

This issue brief is one of a series based on CPEC's long term planning document, *The Challenge of the Century*. Planning for record student enrollment and improving educational outcomes are primary statutory responsibilities of the Commission. In the *Challenge*, the Commission examines solutions and presents recommendations and strategies for providing postsecondary education and training opportunities most effectively and efficiently to increasing numbers of students. For more information on *The Challenge of the Century*, or this issue brief, contact Mary Saenz of the Commission's Governmental Relations Unit at 445-1910.